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ABSTRACT

An informal research project examined how college freshmen's performances and attitudes in writing were influenced by middle and high school writing experiences. Subjects, enrolled in a basic writing course, filled out questionnaires and were interviewed informally concerning their previous writing experiences. Over a period of years, several generalizations were possible: (1) college freshmen had few specific memories of writing in their elementary and middle school years; (2) many students attributed their current dislike for writing to the rigidity of the writing instruction they received in middle and high school; (3) memorable writing assignments in high school included the research paper and the 5-paragraph theme; (4) students invariably mentioned teachers as the most important influence on their writing; and (5) over half of the students surveyed had written independently. (Two questionnaires are attached.) (RS)

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What College Freshmen Say About Previous Writing Experiences

INTRODUCTION

Successful writing requires the cultivation of attitudes as well as skills. While we acknowledge the importance of constructive attitudes in writing, we still know little about the circumstances under which they evolve or fail to evolve. Having taught writing in middle schools, high schools, and colleges over the past 20 years, I (like many of you) have learned that previous experience can profoundly affect student performance in writing classes. And I have learned that exploring previous experiences can help students understand their abilities and idiosyncracies.

For the past several years--in my teaching at the University of South Carolina and more recently at Francis Marion College--I have regularly asked my students about their past writing and what they think of it. I have conducted this inquiry in the form of questionnaires, informal interviews, and occasionally more extended writing. I'd like to explain some of what I've learned about my students' perceptions of their pre-college writing. And I'd like to make a case for encouraging students to engage in this sort of retrospective inquiry in English classes from middle school on up through high school and college.

RESEARCH REVIEW

There has been surprisingly little research on the topic of student attitudes toward writing or on what students recall about their previous writing. Some researchers have studied student attitudes as represented by particular problems, such as writing

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apprehension or writer's block. Others have studied the impact on attitude of teaching innovations, such as word processing. Some well known composition research has dealt tangentially with student attitudes while focusing on other aspects of composition. Some research, such as that of John Daly or Susan Miller, has involved objective questionnaires administered to relatively large numbers of students, while other projects--those by Janet Emig and Mike Rose, for example--have relied on case studies. But researchers haven't told us much about how performance and attitude in writing are influenced by specific experiences, or by guidance from teachers, parents, and reading.

Students themselves can tell us a great deal. Before explaining what I've learned through this sort of inquiry, let me tell you about Kerry.

Kerry was in one of my freshman Basic Writing classes several years ago. He remembers his earliest writing as inept, although in first grade he remembers thinking, "Oh boy, I can't wait to learn to write." He found that writing could be fun when, as he put it, "the teacher got beyond sentence structure." Two influences, one negative and one positive, have been especially important to Kerry. The first relates to handwriting; he was simply unable to master cursive writing and felt embarrassed because of this. His 7th grade teacher, he explains, "felt that he needed a stricter approach" and gave him exercises every night. These were always wrong, so he finally gave up. Kerry's problem with handwriting translated as a problem with writing itself.

The more positive influence on his writing was his discovery of science fiction and fantasy and his urge to try writing some of this on his own. His 11th and 12th grade teacher (the same both years) encouraged him. Kerry says, "He took me aside and showed me how things go, realizing I needed to be shown bit by bit." Apparently, this teacher treated Kerry like a real writer. Kerry had begun reading science fiction and

playing Dungeons and Dragons regularly. In 12th grade he wrote an essay for The Dragon, a game magazine, and his teacher encouraged him to send it in, although he never did.

He began to keep a journal and decided to become a science fiction writer like Roger Zelazny or J.R.R. Tolkien. When he placed into Basic Writing as a college freshman he was disappointed but not deterred. His passion for Dungeons and Dragons continued, and he began to view it as a sort of metaphor for writing. Here's how he expressed it:

> I want to make a world or a universe for others; that's why I like Dungeons and Dragons. If you're the Dragon Master you have to become each creature yourself, and you've got to make the game 3-dimensional. It all begins the moment you open your mouth. Writing is a little like this.

In one sense Kerry was exceptional; few freshmen aspire to become professional writers. But in a more important sense he was like other students. His background included both disappointments and bright spots, and a review of these helped me understand him better, and more importantly, helped him come to grips with himself as a writer.

WRITING SURVEYS

I learned about Kerry's background--and that of other students--in several ways. I've distributed a handout (attached) showing two questionnaires I have used to survey student attitudes and previous writing. The exact form of the questionnaire--and the intensity of my probing--varies from semester to semester. I encourage students to write plenty in response to Questionnaire 1. Questionnaire 2 involves sentence completions and calls for shorter, more spontaneous answers. If I use both, I administer them several days apart.

Also, during the semester I always make it a point to talk with each student informally about previous writing. Our discussions include work in other college courses as well as high school writing. And at times, I've had students write more extensively about their background as writers.

This informal research, which I've been conducting for several years, has not led to precise quantitative results. That has not been my goal. Rather, I have approached this project in a more exploratory spirit, in the belief that having students engage in this process of inquiry is more important than forcing a consensus in what students report.

But let me risk some generalizations with an emphasis mainly on the high school years. I'll tell what I've learned in three areas: rigidity of instruction, the research paper, influences on writing. First, a word about early memories of writing:

EARLY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITING

Few students have vivid recollections of writing before third grade. Asked about early memories of composition, students most often refer to 3rd or 4th grades. Almost none recall kindergarten or preschool writing. Accounts of these early years frequently refer to letters, book reports, stories, and poems. Apparently, young children are frequently called upon to write creatively; in contrast, few mention creative assignments in high school. The general tone of these early memories is positive.

The questionnaires bring out few specific memories of middle school English, and my informal discussions with students seldom reveal strong recollections of writing in those early adolescent years. Not surprisingly, predominant impressions of pre-college writing pertain to high school.

RIGIDITY

When discussing dissatisfactions with writing in the later grades, students again and again point to assignments, expectations, and classroom practices that they find unreasonably rigid. One student attributed her current dislike of writing to the monotony of journals assigned mechanically from seventh grade on and to the lack of variety in writing topics in eleventh and twelfth grades. Another explained that in twelfth grade he "never got anything but a D- or F from the time [he] spent writing," so he gave up. Still another distastefully recalled having to write a number of papers in seventh and eighth grades on conservation, apparently a pet topic of the teacher, whose enthusiasm was lost on his students. Even a student who "always loved writing" was put off by a teacher's overly restrictive standards: when she refused to obey her fifth grade teacher's demand that she change the ending of a story, she was given an "F." The effect of such inflexibility in the writing classroom is a theme running through research by Janet Emig and Mike Rose, among others.

This difficulty is not limited to high schools. Students often say things get worse in college. Wrote one student, "Writing has gone from just a subject to a way of life that I don't particularly enjoy." And there was this poignant commentary on writing as it is still all too often taught:

> Writing used to be fun. Then as the teachers became more and more critical so too did my own view of my writing and then I found myself pondering to try and write to please the teacher. It's no fun anymore.

The troubles Kerry had with handwriting illustrate the toll excessive rigidity can exact on student writers. Young men seem particularly subject to the curse of poor penmanship, and I'm not sure we've thought enough about the damaging impact of poor handwriting on subsequent competence in writing. Several freshmen have admitted a

reluctance to write more than necessary, fearful of how the appearance of their papers would be judged. Despite such frustrations, students generally acknowledge the necessity of learning to write well. This is not true of all subjects. Wrote one young man, "I recognize its importance but still find it difficult." One student described her writing as moving "from simple challenge to commonplace necessity." Another showed a heavy dose of realism: "I thought anyone could write if he tried. But it's harder than that. It takes time."

THE RESEARCH PAPER

Asked to recall one memorable high school writing project, students frequently mention a research paper. One referred to a research paper and oral report on Thomas Hardy; she was pleasantly surprised that she could do such advanced work. Not surprisingly, success on such projects is usually linked with some extrinsic reward, usually a good grade.

Although long graded projects were often viewed favorably, they also could produce frustration. In one class, nine students cited low grades on term papers as their "most negative experience." Some also felt that the term paper assignments were unreasonably restrictive or difficult. As one freshman put it, "I had a poor attitude about writing until recently, mainly because of the long yearly term paper and no other writing at all." Said another, in a familiar refrain, "We always had to have an exact number of note cards, no more, no less."

The prominence of the research paper is equalled only by the doggedness of the 5-paragraph theme in the experience of my students. Recently I've begun asking students, "What guidelines have your teachers given you about writing?" In recent surveys of three classes, over a third, or 20 out of 53 mentioned the 5- paragraph theme.

INFLUENCES

Asked about important influences on their writing, students invariably mention teachers. Only a handful mention published writers. And few name parents or other family members.

Parents are far less prominent than teachers as role models for student writers. Plenty of students acknowledge parental encouragement. But almost none see parental writing itself as an inspiration. This contrasts dramatically with reading, for which parents are often role models. Even the occasional mention of parental writing is generally qualified: "He writes only for his job," "My Mom has to write for classes she's taking," and so on. We have long associated reading in the home with successful reading at school. We do not ordinarily make a similar connection for writing. Young people see little writing at home. And what they do see is often not perceived as real writing.

SELF-SPONSORED WRITING

Given the limited amount of writing observed at home, it is surprising that so many students have tried writing on their own. Well over half of the students I've surveyed have written independently--most often stories, poems, or journals. One young woman, for example, said, "When I was in fifth grade my friend and I started writing stories based on movie characters; we kept this up for several years."

This kind of information can be valuable for students to review--and useful for us to know. The questionnaires, interviews, and conversations with students reveal widely varied experiences so that even the few observations I've made are tentative. But this kind of inquiry can lead students to see how the experiences and metaphors for writing they carry with them can connect with present attitudes and preconceptions. We tend to start over each year or each semester with our students. We assume that they have

acquired certain abilities in previous years--and often we are disappointed that they haven't. But we do not often enough acknowledge that--whatever their abilities--each has a distinctive and rich history as a writer. Some have been more successful than others. Some remember more vividly than others. But all have previous writing experience to draw on, for better or worse, and I think exploring that experience should be a part of every English course.

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WHAT COLLEGE FRESHMEN SAY ABOUT PRE-COLLEGE WRITING

NCTE - Baltimore - November 19, 1989

Questionnaire #1

A1. My parents have affected my attitudes toward writing by
A2. The easiest part about writing is
A3. Before I start to write I
A4. One person helped teach me to write by
A5. Writers are
A6. Teachers usually think of writing as
A7. When I was in first or second grade my view of writing was
A8. When I think of writers I think of
A9. My attitudes about writing are
A10. My attitudes come from
A11. I admire the writing ability of
A12. One of my memories of writing is
A13. The most important thing about writing is
A14. The major influences on my writing have been
A15. Since coming to college my writing has
A16. Writing is
A17. If I were a professional writer I would
A18. Writing teachers tend to
A19. Before coming to college my writing was
A20. From my high school English classes I remember

Questionnaire #2

B1. What are your earliest memories of writing?
B2. How have your attitudes about writing changed through the years?
B3. What was your most positive experience with writing?
B4. What was your most negative experience with writing?
B5. What have been the major influences on your writing?
B6. What is your present attitude toward your own writing?
B7. Do your parents write much? What do your parents seem to think about your writing? How often do they seem to write?
B8. How would you characterize the typical professional writer?
B9. What writer(s) have you admired? Why?
B10. What have teachers done to influence your attitudes toward writing?